

## The "Good Luck" of Polycrates By Herodotus

While Cambyses was carrying on this war in Egypt, the Lacedaemonians likewise sent a force to Samos against Polycrates, the son of Aeaces, who had by insurrection made himself master of that island. At the outset he divided the state into three parts, and shared the kingdom with his brothers, Pantagnotus and Syloson; but later, having killed the former and banished the latter, who was the younger of the two, he held the whole island. Hereupon he made a contract of



friendship with Amasis the Egyptian king, sending him gifts, and receiving from him others in return. In a little while his power so greatly increased, that the fame of it went abroad throughout Ionia and the rest of Greece. Wherever he turned his arms, success waited on him. He had a fleet of a hundred penteconters, and bowmen to the number of a thousand. Herewith he plundered all, without distinction of friend or foe; for he argued that a friend was better pleased if you gave him back what you had taken from him, than if you spared him at the first. He captured many of the islands, and several towns upon the mainland. Among his other doings he overcame the Lesbians in a sea-fight, when they came with all their forces to the help of Miletus, and made a number of them prisoners. These persons, laden with fetters, dug the moat which surrounds the castle at Samos.

The exceeding good fortune of Polycrates did not escape the notice of Amasis, who was much disturbed thereat. When therefore his successes continued increasing, Amasis wrote him the following letter, and sent it to Samos. "Amasis to Polycrates thus sayeth: It is a pleasure to hear of a friend and ally prospering, but thy exceeding prosperity does not cause me joy, forasmuch as I know that the gods are envious. My wish for myself and for those whom I love is to be now successful, and now to meet with a check; thus passing through life amid alternate

good and ill, rather than with perpetual good fortune. For never yet did I hear tell of any one succeeding in all his undertakings, who did not meet with calamity at last, and come to utter ruin. Now, therefore, give ear to my words, and meet thy good luck in this way: bethink thee which of all thy treasures thou valuest most and canst least bear to part with; take it, whatsoever it be, and throw it away, so that it may be sure never to come any more into the sight of man. Then, if thy good fortune be not thenceforth chequered with ill, save thyself from harm by again doing as I have counselled."

When Polycrates read this letter, and perceived that the advice of Amasis was good, he considered carefully with himself which of the treasures that he had in store it would grieve him most to lose. After much thought he made up his mind that it was a signet-ring which he was wont to wear, an emerald set in gold, the workmanship of Theodore, son of Telecles, a Samian. So he determined to throw this away; and, manning a penteconter, he went on board, and bade the sailors put out into the open sea. When he was now a long way from the island, he took the ring from his finger, and, in the sight of all those who were on board, flung it into the deep. This done, he returned home, and gave vent to his sorrow.

Now it happened five or six days afterwards that a fisherman caught a fish so large and beautiful that he thought it well deserved to be made a present of to the king. So he took it with him to the gate of the palace, and said that he wanted to see Polycrates. Then Polycrates allowed him to come in, and the fisherman gave him the fish with these words following- "Sir king, when I took this prize, I thought I would not carry it to market, though I am a poor man who live by my trade. I said to myself, it is worthy of Polycrates and his greatness; and so I brought it here to give it to you." The speech pleased the king, who thus spoke in reply:- "Thou didst right well, friend, and I am doubly indebted, both for the gift, and for the speech. Come now, and sup with me." So the fisherman went home, esteeming it a high honour that he had been asked to sup with the king. Meanwhile the servants, on cutting open the fish, found the signet of their master in its belly. No sooner did they see it than they seized upon it, and hastening to Polycrates with great joy, restored it to him, and told him in what way it had been found. The king, who saw something providential in the matter, forthwith wrote a letter to Amasis, telling him all that had happened, what he had himself done, and what had been the upshot- and despatched the letter to Egypt.

When Amasis had read the letter of Polycrates, he perceived that it does not belong to man to save his fellow-man from the fate which is in store for him; likewise he felt certain that Polycrates would end ill, as he prospered in everything, even finding what he had thrown away. So he sent a herald to Samos, and dissolved the contract of friendship. This he did, that when the great and heavy

misfortune came, he might escape the grief which he would have felt if the sufferer had been his bond-friend.

It was with this Polycrates, so fortunate in every undertaking, that the Lacedaemonians now went to war. Certain Samians, the same who afterwards founded the city of Cydonia in Crete, had earnestly intreated their help. For Polycrates, at the time when Cambyses, son of Cyrus, was gathering together an armament against Egypt, had sent to beg him not to omit to ask aid from Samos; whereupon Cambyses with much readiness despatched a messenger to the island, and made request that Polycrates would give some ships to the naval force which he was collecting against Egypt. Polycrates straightway picked out from among the citizens such as he thought most likely to stir revolt against him, and manned with them forty triremes, which he sent to Cambyses, bidding him keep the men safe, and never allow them to return home.

Now some accounts say that these Samians did not reach Egypt; for that when they were off Carpathus, they took counsel together and resolved to sail no further. But others maintain that they did go to Egypt, and, finding themselves watched, deserted, and sailed back to Samos. There Polycrates went out against them with his fleet, and a battle was fought and gained by the exiles; after which they disembarked upon the island and engaged the land forces of Polycrates, but were defeated, and so sailed off to Lacedaemon. Some relate that the Samians from Egypt overcame Polycrates, but it seems to me untruly; for had the Samians been strong enough to conquer Polycrates by themselves, they would not have needed to call in the aid of the Lacedaemonians. And moreover, it is not likely that a king who had in his pay so large a body of foreign mercenaries, and maintained likewise such a force of native bowmen, would have been worsted by an army so small as that of the returned Samians. As for his own subjects, to hinder them from betraying him and joining the exiles, Polycrates shut up their wives and children in the sheds built to shelter his ships, and was ready to burn sheds and all in case of need.

Source:

<http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.mb.txt>